New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

Volume XVII, Number 17 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 29, 1956

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 29, 1956*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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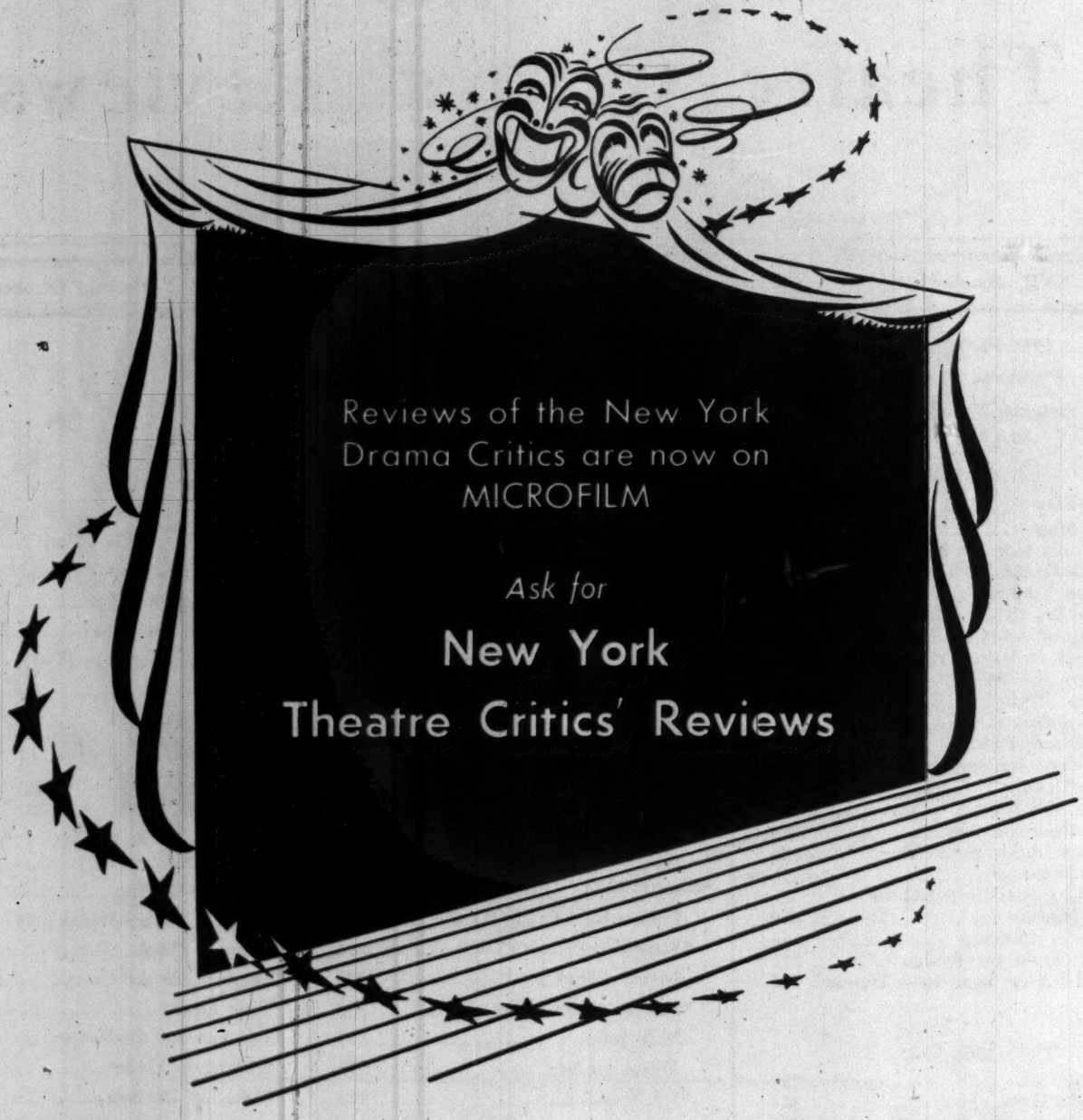
Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.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"The Best House in Naples"

Journal American

October 27, 1956

Feeble Play Offers Little

By JOHN McCLAIN

As a suitable curtain to Act I of something called "The Best House In Naples," which opened at the Lyceum last night, an actress wrests some foam rubber accessories from another actress' facade and flings them onto the stage.

This has something to do with her primeval struggle to latch onto the man who had whisked her out of "The Best House in Naples" and lived with her, illegally, for twenty-odd years.

Nothing Happens

I thought of leaving after that, but then there is always the chance that the ceiling may fall, or that Harry Thaw will shoot Stanford White during the second intermission. This didn't happen, as it turned out, but neither did anything else that needs recounting.

The bad man and the bad lady are regenerated through the fact that the mistress produces three grown boys, one of whom is the son of her common-law husband, and the assumption is that everybody lives happily evermore.

These feeble festivities are the product of F. Hugh Herbert, who adapted them from an Italian comedy by Eduardo de Filippo. It will be recalled that Mr. Herbert gave us such profitable evenings as, "The Moon Is Blue," "For Love or Money" and "Kiss and Tell," so it is hard to imagine how he trapped himself into this theatrical sash-weight.

Katy Lacking

The same question can be asked of Katy Jurado, the estimable Mexican star, who was presented to such good effect in the movie, "High Noon." She is suitably tantalizing and she can act, but she does not possess the monumental powers that would lift the entire evening out of the doldrums.

Rino Negri, an Italian also making his Broadway debut, suffers from the double liability of a sometimes unintelligible accent and a ditto part.

The supporting players strive heroically but are equally unable to keep afloat.

"THE BEST HOUSE IN NAPLES"

Comedy by Eduardo de Filippo; adapted by F. Hugh Herbert; directed by Nick Mayo; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Jerry Boxhorn; original music by George Bassman; presented by Mr. Mayo at the Lyceum Theatre, October 26, 1956. The cast:

Domenico Soriano....Rino Negri
Alfredo.....Silvio Minciotti
Rosalia.....Esther Minciotti
Linda.....Leila Martin
Lucia.....Renee Rogers
Father Bonno...Carlo De Angelo
Filomena Marturano..Katy Jurado
Counsellor Nocella..Mort Marshall
Ricardo.....Morris Miller
Umberto.....Yale Wexler
Antonio.....Loren Farmer
Mario.....Hope Rissman

There is one bright note: A three-piece string orchestra plays Neapolitan-type tunes in one of the upper boxes, and until the curtain goes up they have everybody in quite a gay mood.

DAILY NEWS

October 27, 1956

"Best House in Naples" Tells Of Life Among the Sinful but Loving

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Best House in Naples," adapted by F. Hugh Herbert from an Italian play by Eduardo de Filippo, begins as a tawdry little sex farce, but before the long evening at the Lyceum Theatre is over this comedy becomes the most extravagantly sentimental work since "Little Lord Fauntleroy." The play shortage is increasing at a grim and steady pace.

The production was made last evening by Nick Mayo, who also directed. Producer Mayo's fondness for his scenery (three big sets by Ralph Alswang) and his actors (some of whom are attractive and capable) seems to have run counter to his duties as a director. Some drastic cutting would have improved the shape and pace of "The Best House in Naples" but even this improvement would be pointless.

A New Actress

The comedy does offer us a personable actress, the Mexican Katy Jurado, who has quick humor and fine ease upon a stage. It also offers a Tullio Carminati-type of leading man in the person of Rino Negri and a skillful caricature of a fumbling lawyer by Mort Marshall. But Marshall is only on for a bit and everybody else is on for practically forever.

In the beginning one finds Miss Jurado and Negri in a fine Neapolitan villa where they have lived 22 years, or ever since he took this poor working girl out of "the best house in Naples" and made a dishonest woman of her. Only just now has she tricked him into marrying her.

Tutti Fruti

Well, after many squabbles and accusations, he learns that she has borne three sons, 21, 19 and 18—and she hints that only one of them is his and she won't tell which one. Oh, dear . . .

Anyhow, they all wind up as One Big Happy Family, drinking champagne and eating spumoni—a confection I never encountered in many long sojourns in Italy. As a matter of fact, I never saw Neapolitan ice cream in Naples, either. And I don't suppose I'll ever know what prompted the genial F. Hugh Herbert to adapt this comedy. He should have adapted something really sassy like "Up in Mabel's Room."

The New York Times

October 27, 1956

'The Best House in Naples' at Lyceum

By BROOKS ATKINSON

JUST as the curtain goes up on "The Best House in Naples," which opened at the Lyceum last evening, there is a crisp passage in the dialogue.

Putting his ear against a closed door, the head of the house says: "I don't hear any voices." "Possibly no one is talking," the butler replies. This is the most sensible exchange of ideas the play contains. From this point onward "The Best House in Naples" runs steadily downhill.

It is billed as a comedy by Eduardo de Filippo, adapted by F. Hugh Herbert, with the incendiary Katy Jurado, the Mexican firebrand, igniting the leading role. Years and years ago, before either the author or adapter set pen to paper, Filomena Marturano (the part she plays) was a prostitute in the best house in Naples. Years and tons of manuscript pages later she is the lawfully wedded wife of her rich lover, and the final curtain falls coquettishly, though redundantly, on their nuptials.

It would be interesting to know what sort of play the author, adapter, director, producer, designer and actors thought they were inventing, and what were the hopes of the backers. For "The Best House in Naples" is about as pointless a comedy as Broadway has put on in the last fortnight. Let's not even go into the problem of taste.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 27, 1956

There's No Joy In This House

By TOM DONNELLY.

The curtain rises on "The Best House in Naples" (at the Lyceum) approximately 20 years too late.

The heroine is a woman in her shady 40s, the hero is a man in his early 50s, and they wrangle, wrangle, wrangle over issues which seem purely academic. Will the man marry the lady, hereby solemnizing their irregular union of two decades? Will the lady reveal to the man which one of her three grown sons is his?

There's a very tricky, and profoundly uninteresting, social problem posed here. All of the boys have been born out of wedlock, but one of them has been born on the wrong side of the wrong side of the blanket. Does that make him twice as illegitimate as his brothers? I'd ask Emily Post, but I don't suppose she'd deign to answer such a sordid query.

Herbert Adaptation.

"The Best House in Naples" was adapted by F. Hugh Herbert from an Italian original by Eduardo de Filippo, and I kept wishing that Mr. Herbert had maintained his customary accent on youth.

Twenty years ago the heroine was employed in a high-class bordello, and it was there that she met her first non-commercial love. Why didn't Mr. Herbert show us that meeting? I'll bet it was cute.

And then, once she had been installed by the hero in his tacky villa on the hill, how did she manage to spirit in those three amorous partners? Who were they? How did she produce the babies without letting the man who paid the bills know that something was up?

And how did she smuggle the tots into town and place them in suitable accommodations, without anyone being the wiser? Why there's enough stuff here to keep a latter-day Proust excavating day and night, for approximately a thousand days and a thousand nights.

As it stands, on foundations that will give way at any moment, "The Best House in Naples" is either an Italian tragedy unsuccessfully converted into an American farce, or an Italian farce rather unsuccessfully converted into an American tragedy. I really couldn't say which.

A few of the incidents are racy, as when the heroine rips the falsies out of the bosom of a rival charmer.

On the other hand, there is a great deal of solemn chatter about the rights of childhood and the privileges of parenthood. What I say is, plays like "The Best House in Naples" should be not seen and not heard.

As a matter of fact, the actors do their best to fill this latter requirement.

Accents Grave.

Katy Jurado, the star, retains a Spanish inflection of resolute strength. Encountering her leading man in a chapel, she cries, "You shooed not spick of leaving in scene in these holly plass!" (I think that means "You should not speak of living in sin in this holy place," but I don't suppose it matters, particularly.)

Some of the supporting artists are born bona-fide Italians, and when they speak of blinding, crippling, and renting, I've a notion they mean bleeding, creeping, and ranting. But again, six of one will get you half a dozen of the other.

I have long admired Miss Jurado in the movies, and I sympathize with her in her melancholy predicament, and salute her as a toothsome figure of a woman. She is as handsome as one of Diego Rivera's rare portraits of a female with nothing on her mind but her femininity.

My final reflection is this: When is bordello-conscious Broadway going to give us a musical version of "A House Is Not a Home," with Miss Mae West presiding over the festivities?

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 27, 1956

THEATER

'The Best House in Naples'

By WALTER KERR

"THE Best House in Naples" is an adaptation by F. Hugh Herbert from the Italian of Eduardo de Filippo.

The curtain rises on a painter whose mistress of twenty-three years is being given the rites of the dying by a priest in the next room. The painter has just married the dying woman, to ease her last hours. He is now idly flirting with the nurse, who has earlier nursed him through a gall-bladder operation. The priest enters, accepts a decanter of brandy, and goes.

The mistress enters, hale and hearty. She has tricked him into marriage. He throws a vase of flowers into the fireplace. She throws a vase of flowers onto the patio. The mistress announces that she has secretly given birth to three now-grown sons, none of whom are his. An old servant covers his face with his hands. The mistress turns on the nurse, rips the falsies out of her uniform, and throws them across the stage.

• • •

In the second act the three sons arrive. The eldest is a dealer in noiseless plumbing. Supposing that he has been called to fix the plumbing, he says "People throw the damndest things in toilets." The second son arrives and pinches the housemaid. She says "Don't do that!" The third son arrives and makes a light reference to the second as a sex-maniac. The second resents the remark, the first intervenes in the quarrel and is told to go fix a leaky toilet.

• • •

The mother enters to the boys, explains that she has been, successively, a harlot, a mistress, and then unfaithful to her paramour, throws open her arms, and cries "My sons!" A lawyer arrives to arrange an annulment and sits on his briefcase. To forestall the annulment, the mistress tells the painter that one of the sons is his. He wants to know how she can be sure. She reminds him that he has been in the jocular habit of leaving tips on the top of the bureau on certain mornings, and that she has earmarked the tip on this particular occasion.

• • •

In the third act the mistress, now legally separated from the painter, goes to church to place a rose before a statue of the Madonna. The painter is there, they talk about how skinny the nurse was, and he asks her to marry him properly. She will put the matter to her sons, with one of whom she is living. The painter lights a vigil light.

• • •

At the son's home, where the plumbing is not noiseless, she rocks her first grandchild in a rocking-chair and listens to the painter defend himself to the boys, one of whom explains that he began his own sex activity at the age of thirteen. In a final scene, painter and mistress return from a church wedding for a family reception. The grandchild is crying because it never sleeps well in a strange bed. "That never bothered me" remarks the old servant. The party disperses. The mistress, now wife, says she is sleepy. The painter, left alone for a moment, marks a bank-note for his own future reference, and the play ends.

It is not a distinguished piece of work.

Daily Mirror
October 27, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'House in Naples' Is Disappointing Play

• Herbert's latest is likely to prove one of worst of season.

Even the best of playwrights have off nights, and F. Hugh Herbert had his Friday at the Lyceum Theatre. The fault wasn't entirely Herbert's, for he was re-telling a comedy originally penned by Eduardo de Filippo. Anyway, "The Best House in Naples" is likely to prove one of the worst plays you'll see on the Main Stem this season.

The new arrival has to do with a rich Italian artist who takes a beaut out of a bordello, lives with her for 23 years and then is tricked into marrying her. The lady, it seems, has borne three sons, and wants a name for them. She had them all without her protector's ever knowing it.

HE HAD BEEN AWAY racing his stable of horses in foreign lands, while his mistress was producing sons—only one of which is his. Naturally, with the paternal spirit aroused, the father seeks to find his own. But the mother demands that he recognize them all, and refuses to identify the true heir.

So, having gotten an annulment, he marries mama all over again, adopts the brood and decides that he has the best and happiest house in Naples. At least, happy for him. It was often less than that for some of us out front. It was downright embarrassing at times.

Herbert is usually a clever craftsman. He has given us several slick clicks in the past. They have been notable for humor and warmth. In this instance, he is telling a rough tale roughly. In striving for laughs, he has gone to the slapstick. And he uses it crudely to garner chuckles.

• • •

IMPRESARIO Nick Mayo has given "The Best House in Naples" the benefit of costly and elaborate settings by Ralph Alswang. And he has corralled a cast of interesting players for its many roles, including film star Katy Jurado and Rino Negri. It is difficult to pass accurate judgment on their skills, for they are handicapped by clumsy dialogue and cheek-pinking situations.

Others laboring valiantly in a lost cause are Silvio Minciotti, Esther Minciotti, Leila Martin, Renee Rogers, Carlo De Angelo, Mort Marshall, Morris Miller, Yale Wexler, Loren Farmer and Hope Rissman. It is good to have De Angelo back with us, after an absence of 30 years from the stage. He makes the most of an amiable padre.

We cannot understand why Herbert should waste his gifts on adapting such corny trivia as "The Best House in Naples," when he can pen such delightful originals as "The Moon Is Blue" and "Kiss and Tell." But if he wants to, it's his privilege. He's earned the right, via previous achievements, to have a brief holiday from merit.

• • •

THE BASIC IDEA of "The Best House in Naples" is not a new one. The problem of illegitimacy has been treated more tastefully and effectively in such charades as "Dear Charles" and "The Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker." Anyway, "The Best House" is calculated to preclude dozing. For though not good, it's good and loud.

New York Post

October 28, 1956

Is This the Best House They Have in All Naples?

"Harbor Lights," "Sixth Finger in a Five Flager Glove" and "Double in Hearts," move over! Unbelievable as it is, you've met your natural-born match. The new disaster, which had its dismal opening at the Lyceum Friday night, is called "The Best House in Naples," and it's a tasteless little antic about an Italian gentleman who meets a girl in a Neapolitan bordello, takes her as his mistress and, 23 years later, marries her because he thinks she's dying. Meanwhile, she's been having a trio of sons, and he can't discover which of the loathesome three is his.

This bit of Latin charm has other equally winning features. As the curtain for the first act, the bride rips the falsies off of the nasty nurse who is trying to steal her man, and a later scene takes place in a church. This juxtaposition of episodes indicates rather neatly the quality of "The Best House in Naples." It starts out as farce and then slips into wistful sentiment about the basically noble nature of its heroine. And it's similarly dreadful in either of its moods.

Despite the cruel punishment it inflicts on its audience, I'm afraid it may be a little brutal to quote some of its dialogue against the unfortunate new play, but I can't resist singling out one line because of the warning inherent in it. In an early scene, a character earnestly and almost tenderly remarks, "We'll feel better when it's over," and, if ever a play was symbolized and summed up in a nutshell, here it is. There are also a few jokes about plumbing that didn't strike me as uproarious.

It is a thought perhaps worth brooding over that the comedy was adapted by F. Hugh Herbert from the Italian of Eduardo de Filippo, who is regarded by experts as one of Italy's ablest dramatists. Recalling that Ugo Betti, who wrote a disaster of last season known as "Island of Goats," was also billed as an Italian playwright of important stature, one is led to the grim conclusion that either this beautiful and charming country is badly off dramatically or it is being betrayed monstrously in the matter of adaptations into English.

The actors suffered enough Friday night without having their misfortunes set down in any detail. Katy Jurado, of the films, and Rino Negri are hopelessly entrapped in the leading roles, although Mr. Negri bears up gallantly. It seemed to me that Leila Martin, who plays the vanquished rival, was the most attractive member of the cast, and she disappears hastily after her first-act mauling at the hands of Miss Jurado. Tastelessness is only one of the sad evening's fatal ailments. RICHARD WATTS Jr.

"Separate Tables"

DAILY NEWS

October 26, 1956

Fine Trick Acting by Two Stars Highlights New 'Separate Tables'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Terence Rattigan is a nice, neat English dramatist and he has fashioned two nice, neat playlets which share the title of "Separate Tables." These little pieces were presented at the Music Box last evening, and most of their charm lies in the trick acting of the stars, Margaret Leighton and Eric Portman, who come here from a two-year run in London.

Although I admire their artfulness and the tidy manner in which Rattigan has fashioned his plays, I don't think Miss Leighton and Mr. Portman will be doing another two-year stretch here. The chief astonishment of "Separate Tables" lies in the ability of each of the stars to portray two different characters in two small plays in one evening.

Good Transformations

No doubt about it, these actors are good at their jobs. One would scarcely suspect, if one didn't read one's program, that Portman could be a rejected husband in one sketch and a pathetic old faker in the next. Even more impressive is the transformation of Miss Leighton from a sophisticated lady to a sniveling young neurotic. This, indeed, is a remarkable feat of miming; but to me it is basically a stunt, like balancing a feather on the nose, and therefore more remarkable than admirable.

The first of these plays is called "Table by the Window." The second is "Table Number Seven." The link between them is that both take place in the dining room and sitting room of a modest resort hotel in the seaside town of Bournemouth.

Good Support

The first offering is a curtain-raiser for the second. In it, Portman is a has-been politician who has done a stretch for wife-beating, and he has beaten this cool and charming lady because he loves her so much.

In the second and more moving play, Portman is a charming old faker who pinches women in movie theatres because he is simply and innocently lonely, and Miss Leighton is a nervous virgin who manages to defy her domineering mother and stick up for him.

The other players in the company are very good types—particularly Phyllis Neilson-Terry as the dragon mother and May Hallatt as an old bag given to card-reading and horse-betting. Indeed, everything is neat, including Peter Glenville's directing and Michael Weight's settings.

"SEPARATE TABLES"

Two plays by Terence Rattigan; staged by Peter Glenville; settings by Michael Weight; lighting by Paul Morrison; production by arrangement with Stephen Mitchell; presented by the Producers Theatre in association with Hecht-Lancaster at the Music Box Theatre, October 25, 1956. The cast:

"Table by the Window"

Mabel.....Georgia Harvey
Lady Matheson.....Jane Eccles
Mrs. Railton-Bell.....
Phyllis Neilson-Terry
Miss Meacham.....May Hallatt
Doreen.....Helena Carroll
Mr. Fowler....William Podmore
Mrs. Shankland..Margaret Leighton
Miss Cooper.....Beryl Measor
Mr. Malcolm.....Eric Portman
Charles Stratton..Donald Harron
Jean Tanner.....Ann Hillary

"Table Number Seven"

Jean Stratton.....Ann Hillary
Charles Stratton..Donald Harron
Major Pollock.....Eric Portman
Mr. Fowler...William Podmore
Miss Cooper.....Beryl Measor
Mrs. Railton-Bell.....
Phyllis Neilson-Terry
Miss Railston-Bell.....
Margaret Leighton
Lady Matheson.....Jane Eccles
Miss Meacham.....May Hallatt
Mabel.....Georgia Harvey
Doreen.....Helena Carroll

Daily Mirror

October 26, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Separate Tables' Dull British Drama

• Fine acting goes to waste in Rattigan's tedious talk-fest.

The Producers Theatre brought a little Britsh number called "Separate Tables" to the Music Box Thursday evening. It should be called "The Bournemouth Bores." We've encountered nothing so dull since "George and Margaret." If you're suffering from insomnia, forget those sleeping pills.

The new arrival will do just as well.

Believe it or not, this dilly ran for two years in London. Okay, "George and Margaret" and "Rookery Nook" rang up long engagements in the West End, too. By the way, did you ever catch "Rookery Nook"? There was one to forget quickly.

"SEPARATE TABLES" is really two plays in one. The first three scenes have to do with a Cabinet official, banished from his job for drunkenness and assault. His cold and calculating ex-wife pursues him to a mediocre hotel on the South coast of England, but the landlady of the caravanseral is also enamored of him. That's all we're going to tell you about that plot.

The last two scenes are concerned with a phony army major, who goes around pinching dames in movie houses. It seems he was frustrated by something or other in his youth, and that was his way of overcoming shyness. When the news of his escapades gets around the Bauregard Hotel, one old b'ddy calls a kangaroo court to throw him out on his ear.

A few of her fellow guests are willing to go along. But, finally, nearly all of them agree that "the major" is really a good guy. After all, what's so bad about pinching a few femmes in cinemas? That is, in England? Over here, we toss such punks into the pokey.

Author Terence Rattigan is quite the one for penning such tedious talk-fests as "Separate Tables." He has a knack for creating interesting characters, and then doesn't know what to do with them. He can stretch an idea as thin as a non-caloric wafer. Peter Glenville, one of our favorite directors, has staged the somnolent charades with genuine skill.

YOU WON'T SEE better acting along Broadway than that on tap at the Music Box. Such grand troupers as Eric Portman, Margaret Leighton, Beryl Measor, Donld Harron, Phyllis Neilson-Terry, Ann Hillary, Georgia Harvey, Jane Eccles, May Hallatt, Helena Carroll and William Podmore have a field day in these feeble trifles.

There's one admirable thing about "Separate Tables." It has an early finale. Its running time is relatively short. It only seems like a lost weekend when you're trapped in the Music Box. Frankly, we searched for our pocket calendar.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 26, 1956

Tandem Triumph, High Time, Too!

TOM DONNELLY.

In a sparkling theatrical season Terence Rattigan's "Separate Tables," the bill of two one-act plays at the Music Box, would easily make itself felt as a combination of accomplished playwriting, brilliant acting and perceptive staging. Of that I am convinced. At the moment, in the midst of the encircling gloom, it looks like the art work of the ages.

Mr. Rattigan has been for some years a bone of contention between the opposing critical forces of Great Britain and the U.S. The British have maintained that Mr. Rattigan has all along been carving thick succulent slices right off the smoking joint of life, and most Americans have said, always allowing for the exception of "The Winslow Boy," that Mr. Rattigan has been putting his theatrical sandwiches together without any filling.

"Separate Tables" is an occasion for transatlantic agreement. I don't think Mr. Rattigan has been maligned here in the past. Rather, I think that this time around Mr. Rattigan has gotten down to the business of putting real people in real situations and letting the sparks fly upward.

Not Shattering Truths.

To be sure, the two plays which make up 'Separate Tables" are not massive demonstrations of shattering truths. The plots are slight, and the characters are small in scale.

A typical climatic passage has a pale spinster demonstrating her new-found independence by telling her gorgon of a mother that she intends to finish her dinner in a public dining room in defiance of a parental injunction to leave in the middle of the fish course. Since everything that has gone before is honestly and appealingly stated, this mild flare of rebellion is at least as exciting and significant as might be a typical American heroine's decision to elope with a dope addict.

Mr. Rattigan's general scene is a drab hotel in a seaside town on the south coast of England. The secondary characters in both plays remain constant. Most of them are elderly people who pass their days debating the merits of the stuffed pork over the goulash, and variously regretting or denying that nobody anywhere wants them.

Elegant Divorcee.

In the first play, 'Table by the Window," an elegant divorcee who is coming apart at the seams, tracks down her favorite ex-husband, a disgraced politician originally from the back streets of Liverpool, and begs him to make her feel like a flesh and blood woman again.

In "Table Number Seven," a crashing bore of a military man is unmasked as a fantastic liar and a molester of females at the cinema, to the particular dismay of a dehydrated maiden lady who has come to admire him extravagantly.

Eric Portman is superb as the politician (a tough , intelligent man driven to a frenzy of exasperation because he cannot rid himself of his passion for a hopelessly irritating woman), and as the compulsive bad man of the movie houses (a jauntily pathetic figure, perilously close to dissolving before our very eyes).

Sharp Contrasts.

Mr. Portman accomplished his two sharply contrasting characterizations by the kind of interior acting that devotees of, you should excuse the expression, the Stanislavsky method, talk about but seldom achieve.

Margaret Leighton does dazzling things with make-up. As the divorcee she looks like a Vogue model on the road to perdition, and as the spinster she suggests a rabbit on the way to the trap. I haven't seen such effects since Lon Chaney was in his hey-day.

Make no mistake about it, however. Miss Leighton's work cuts below the surface, too, and she is particularly adroit in persuading us that the divorcee has a human circulatory system under all that lacquer.

The supporting artists are uniformly excellent and I wish I had space to do more than list them: Beryl Measor, Phyllis Neilson-Terry, May Hallatt, Jane Eccles, Donald Harron, William Podmore. Peter Glenville directed—masterfully.

Herald Tribune NEW YORK
October 26, 1956

THEATER

'Separate Tables'

By WALTER KERR

ANYBODY for some nice, sharp, acty acting in two very nice and immensely actable plays?

The kind of acting I'm inviting you to in this instance is a slightly special breed. It begins somewhere in an appreciation of Charles Dickens, refines itself to the point where Somerset Maugham might have made use of it, and gradually hones itself to the crisp, polite, and stilletto-like accents of Terence Rattigan.

Let me see if I can describe it to you. In the second of the two partially related plays that go to make up a conceit called "Separate Tables," Margaret Leighton drags her spindly carcass into the lounge of a second-class provincial hotel, and for a moment you don't know that she's there.

Just one intermission earlier she has been stalking the same lounge with a jaunty stride, a cigarette-hand that trembles mightily, a garish crimson smile, and eyelashes that seem wing-like enough to outdistance Mercury. Now, in a flamboyant switch of characters, she is a dowdy, inhibited, red-nosed, coarse-grained pitiable spinster—and an obvious second cousin to any sniveling drudge out of "The Old Curiosity Shop" or "Bleak House."

Make no mistake about it. This is the sort of acting that calls attention to itself, that glories in its own superb charlatanry, that begs to be hauled up on bill-posters and painted in bright colors. Yet here is the interesting part. It works. At the same time you are wondering how Miss Leighton dares teeter so boldly on the edge of the penny-dreadfuls, Miss Leighton is slipping one over on you. She is getting under your skin with that compressed and humiliated little grimace with which she feels her way toward a disgraced army officer, and with the stiff-legged and abortive little thrusts she makes toward her scandalmongering mother. The shrewd, and pretty much shameless, Mr. Rattigan has written for this girl one of those climaxes in which the worm really turns, lifting its battered head right into the bracing air, and by the time Miss Leighton reaches it she has got you hopelessly committed and thoroughly ready for some splendidly satisfying tears. It's lithograph work, and it's lovely.

Eric Portman's changes of pace may not be quite so spectacular. But I defy you to take your eyes off the man. As a boozing husband who has once nearly throttled his wife—this is in the first of the evening's playlets—he comes close to resembling the James Cagney of the British Labor Party. With a taut lower lip shivering in anger, his hands fidgeting in his pockets as he restrains a fresh murderous impulse, and his voice steadily descending to an even more froglike bleat, he makes every sudden shudder and every yearning impulse vibrate with intense and raging personal meaning.

In the second half of the bill Mr. Portman eases jauntily—that's a curious combination of words, but it's what this insecure pretender does—into a seaside hotel, tiptoes ostentatiously around a young fellow who is trying to work, and then rattles off garrulities with the uneasy affability of the condemned. The touch here is light; the final victory of the man is utterly unstressed; but all the odd little fumbles and gaffes and stammered apologies have grown into a responsible, and admirable, man.

Under Peter Glenville's waspish direction—he is really very much the keeper of a hornet's nest—the whole company turns to with a brisk and bedeviling will. Phyllis Neilson-Terry revels in a bit of spicy gossip with positively aristocratic relish. May Hallatt reports a midnight conversation with Louis XIV with a wonderfully asthmatic sobriety (she "likes 'em dead"). Jane Eccles stiffens her grandmotherly spine with a fine, fierce ardor. Beryl Measor offers her house guests a direct sympathy that is extremely warming, and Donald Harron and Ann Hillary are both excellent as a pair of forthright youngsters.

I have not meant to neglect author Rattigan. After all, the actable parts needed an ear and an eye and a crafty carpenter's hand behind them. There is, to be sure, an air of trim but transparent carpentry at the Music Box: in those matinee happy endings, in the very obviousness of the striking contrasts. But the building is neat, it is practical, and it houses some extremely arresting people. That's something for a playwright to have brought off.

I'd say he's made up a prize package, and I found its sheer theatricality fascinating.

Journal American NEW YORK
October 26, 1956

Has Gimmick --Ends Strong

By JOHN McCLAIN

TERENCE RATTIGAN is a skilled, ingenious and prolific playwright, but it seems to me that in "Separate Tables," which opened at the Music Box last night, he came close to outsmarting himself.

His evening, which is actually two plays with a single intermission, involves a gimmick: the locale is the same, and the background characters retain their identities. Thus, in "Table By the Window," the first act of the duet, we have Eric Portman and Margaret Leighton, the stars, portraying the parts of a divorced husband and his ex-wife thrown together in a British resort hotel; in "Table Number Seven," the second stanza, we find the same two principals enacting different people, but played against the same settings, with an identical supporting cast.

The idea is sound in itself, but I think he would have been better advised to forget his first act.

For the initial charade is not altogether rewarding. The denizens of the dining-room in a Bournemouth hostel are reasonably droll—the refined widows, the ascetic lady horseplayer, the retired professor, the young couple, the housekeeper and the comic waitresses. But when we get into the problems of the mysterious man of letters, who drinks too much, and the glamorous visitor from Mayfair, it is only through Miss Leighton's and Mr. Portman's magic that we are restrained until the not unexpected moment when they get together.

But this curtain-raiser does serve its oblique purpose: it sets the stage for the truly moving moments to follow. At least we know the kind of place it is, the characters of the subordinate players, and into this stuffy atmosphere we are introduced to two electric new people. One is a sad and wistful retired Army man whose pretensions to glory suddenly collapse when he is arrested for a minor sex offense in a neighborhood movie house. The other is the psychopathic ugly-duckling daughter of a stern matriarch, whose only release from a lonely and frustrated life was provided by the affection she shared wth the ex-officer.

This is a simple tale of great poignance and charm, and the two stars contribute immeasurably to its vitality. There is enormous pathos in Portman's delineation of the phony guardsman—the clipped speech, the stiff back and carefully paced stride — and Miss Leighton's portrayal of the sniffling, red-nosed wallflower is enough to atomize your heart.

Of the cast which remains intact through both plays Phyllis Neilson-Terry is a towering and overbearing Mrs. Railton-Bell; May Hallatt has some of the evening's best lines as the parlay addict; Beryl Measor adds a note of adult realism as the hotel manager; Helena Carroll is a pert and prattling waitress; William Podmore is a philosophical pedant; Jane Eccles is an understanding gentlewoman; and Donald Harron and Ann Hillary are beguiling newlyweds.

"Separate Tables" is an evening divided against itself; it is performed with great distinction throughout, but Rattigan should only take pride in his strong finish.

New York Post

October 26, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Dramatic Triumph From London

The two plays that Terence Rattigan has written under the collective title of "Separate Tables" provide a brilliant tour-de-force of acting for a pair of distinguished British players, Eric Portman and Margaret Leighton. But they are considerably more than just highly effective starring vehicles. As presented last night at the Music Box, the combined work results, as it did in London, in an absorbing evening of dramatic entertainment that is not only notably played in every role, but reveals the ablest of contemporary English playwrights at the very peak of his form.

Mr. Portman and Miss Leighton are so sensationally successful in their performances that it might be easy to neglect the skillful and perceptive art of Mr. Rattigan. For he hasn't merely written them showy roles that they can act stunningly. He has done this, too, but he embedded their characterizations in a theatrical work that combines the most guileful craftsmanship with sensitivity, deep feeling, the keenest of humorous observation, emotional power, and an honest sense of the touching loneliness of social outcasts in a world of genteel poverty.

That "Separate Tables" has something of the quality of the most expert slickpaper magazine fiction is, I think, true, but here, also, it is difficult to say so without being unfair to Mr. Rattigan. Such a description does indicate rightly enough the surface polish of his writing and the talent for frank and resourceful showmanship that has gone into it. But it would be doing the author an injustice if it failed to make clear the fact that the sheer theatrical guile is allied with fine sincerity of emotion and a real compassion for the lonely and the misfits.

But there can be no adequate contemplation of "Separate Tables" that strays far from the performances of the two stars. In the first play, Mr. Portman is an ex-leader of the Labor Party, now in lost alcoholic disgrace after the collapse of his career, and Miss Leighton is the fading but still beautiful model, who is responsible for his fate. In the latter, he is a pathetic military fake, guilty of a sad little offense against public morals, and she is the frustrated old-maidish daughter of an overpowering mother. All four portrayals are characterizations in depth.

The setting of both plays is an English boarding hotel inhabited chiefly by elderly people who have seen better days and are living out the remnants of their lives on what is left of their incomes. Save for the central figures, the characters are the same in both, and Mr. Rattigan has observed them with a delightful mixture of humor and sympathy. I think the second of the two sections is the better, and it's the one in which Mr. Portman does probably his shrewdest work. All of "Separate Tables," though, is touching, humorous and compassionate, and admirably dramatic.

There isn't a performance that lacks distinction. Particularly fine is Beryl Measor, who plays with the most sensitive feeling the understanding manager of the hotel, a delightful woman with a tragedy of her own. But the others are also splendid. May Hallatt, Jane Eccles, Phyllis Neilson-Terry, Helena Carroll, William Podmore and Georgia Harvey offer gems of characterization, while Donald Harron and Ann Hillary, as the young people of the establishment, are far more than a conventional juvenile and ingenue. I think "Separate Tables" is a triumph.

The New York Times

October 26, 1956

The Theatre: 'Separate Tables'

Two Plays by Rattigan Open at Music Box

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE Terence Rattigan has written a particularly fine play, it is only fair that it should be wonderfully well acted. "Separate Tables," which opened at the Music Box last evening, brings us two memorable performances by Eric Portman and Margaret Leighton.

Two performances for both actors, in fact. For "Separate Tables" consists of two short plays set in a middle-class hotel on the south coast of England. Most of the minor characters carry over from the first play to the second, continuing a general impression of shabby gentility, pettiness and pathos.

Under the polite surface of life in the hotel, Mr. Rattigan suggests the desolation of elderly people who live together formally without having anything in common except hotel food and gossip. Although Mr. Rattigan's literary style is light, his awareness of the dreary lives of his minor characters is poignant.

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But the scheme of the drama is to present Miss Leighton and Mr. Portman as different characters in each play. In the first, entitled "Table by the Window," she is a reserved and calculating woman of 40 who has been twice divorced. He is the drunken remnant of a former politician of considerable notoriety and promise, and it soon appears that they once were married.

"Table by the Window" is a quick character sketch of two high-strung people who destroy each other but need each other, too. The craftsmanship and the writing are enormously expert. The acting is brilliant. Miss Leighton's icily correct woman of fortune who is terrified of the future, and Mr. Portman's erratic, irascible dipsomaniac are vivid characters, portrayed with the same economy of means that Mr. Rattigan has used in the writing. It would be impossible to distinguish one from the other.

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Although the first play is knowing and expert, the second is also profoundly moving. "Table Number Seven," as Mr. Rattigan calls it, is a study in tolerance among ordinary people. The guests in the hotel are shocked to read in the newspaper that the garrulous retired major who has been boring them with his stories has pleaded guilty to having molested a woman in a movie theatre audience.

The female juggernaut of the hotel is for having the major instantly evicted. But the other guests are more inclined to feel sorry for him. And the highly neurotic daughter of the female juggernaut sympathizes with him particularly. For she, too, is afraid of life, as the major is, and finds that they have much in common. They are the dispossessed, set aside from polite society. Possibly they can save each other.

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Although Mr. Rattigan has written some popular fictions in the past that seemed almost too cleverly contrived, "Table Number Seven" is a masterpiece in miniature. The writing is reticent, but the pity and insight are admirably expressed. Certainly, this is the most penetrating inquiry into the human spirit that Mr. Rattigan has yet written, and it considerably alters his reputation as a theatre writer.

Since the characters Miss Leighton and Mr. Portman play in the second drama are quite unlike the characters in the first, their acting in "Separate Tables" might sound like a tour de force. But that would underestimate the quality of what they have accomplished. The second characters are works of art in their own right. The spurious little major with his ugly habits and the overwrought, frightened young lady have basic decencies, hopes and perceptions that distinguish them as people. Actors of taste as well as virtuosity, Miss Leighton and Mr. Portman play the parts with great tenderness and beauty.

Everything about "Separate Tables" is enlightened theatre. Michael Weight's settings are unobtrusively illuminating. Under Peter Glenville's quiet direction the performance is effortless and alive. The minor parts are extremely well acted, particularly by Beryl Measor as the compassionate hotelkeeper, Phyllis Neilsen-Terry as a heartless snob, Jane Eccles as an elderly guest with a gentle manner, May Hallatt as an extroverted spinster, Donald Harron as a young student of independent mind and Ann Hillary as the young student he marries.

To his familiar skill as a craftsman, Mr. Rattigan has added understanding and forgiveness. "Separate Tables" is the finest thing he has written.

"Romeo and Juliet"

Journal American

October 25, 1956

Old Vic Triumphs --So Does Shakespeare

By JOHN McCLAIN

MIDST manifold alarums and excursions and the frequent clashing of swords, the Old Vic Co. hauled off at the Winter Garden last night and delivered a turbulent and utterly engaging performance of "Romeo and Juliet."

Claire Bloom, who was somewhat smothered in the limited role of the Queen in "Richard II" came to life as a magnificently fragile and appealing Juliet, and John Neville brought to the role of Romeo a brilliant, believable and always articulate interpretation of the unhappy hero. Again these imported stars, so slickly versed in all departments of Shakespearean repertory, have provided a memorable evening.

Wealth of Lusty Humor

In the portfolio of the great Bard, this simple love story remains relatively unadorned by the complex political and social foments of the era, yet possesses an abundance of poetry and vigor.

There is a wealth of lusty humor and action; there are the most moving love scenes in our language. It is a delight to return to it—especially when it is presented with the skilled mountings, the professional precision of the actors.

The Old Vic version of the great tragedy appeared to me to have been given a more telescopic treatment than is often the case. The scenes in which sword-play was involved were reduced to swift and humane scuffles, no less carefully timed and certainly coming closer to reality.

The moments of deep anguish were similarly kept somewhere within the limits of normal speech; players were permitted to roll on the floor for less protracted periods, and even the final death scene, which often tests the patience of the most devoted classicists, seemed to reach a swifter and less strident end.

Apart from Miss Bloom and Neville, who here establish themselves among the foremost duets in our time, there must be added the name of Paul Rogers, certainly a stand-out Mercutio in the roster of his many predecessors. In the same category there are excellent contributions by Ronald Allen, as Benvolio; Jack Gwillim, as Friar Laurence; Charles Gray, as Escalus; Richard Wordsworth as (gasp!) Tybalt; and Wynne Clark, as Juliet's nurse. All these players, through long experience and solid knowledge of their parts, play into each other's hands with the effortless precision of a World's Series infield. It is a joy to behold.

Credit Helpmann

Credit for much of the movement of the proceedings must of course revert to the agile hand of Robert Helpmann, who directed, and to the scenery of Loudon Sainthill. Drops are lowered, curtains are drawn to limit the stage, an occasional piece of furniture is noiselessly pulled into place, and by the mere lowering of lights the big stage is transformed from town square to boudoir to chapel. It is quick, innocuous, and quite wonderful.

"ROMEO AND JULIET"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Robert Helpmann; costumes and decor by Loudon Sainthill; music composed by Brian Easdale; presented by the Old Vic Trust Ltd. and the Arts Council of Great Britain under the management of Sol Hurok at the Winter Garden Theatre, October 24, 1956. The cast:

Escalus.....Charles Gray
Paris.....Jeremy Brett
Montague.....Denis Holmes
Capulet.....Ernest Hare
Romeo.....John Neville
Mercutio.....Paul Rogers
Benvolio.....Ronald Allen
Tybalt.....Richard Wordsworth
Friar Laurence....Jack Gwillim
Friar John.....Daniel Moynihan
Balthasar.....John Woodvine
Sampson.....Aubrey Morris
Gregory.....Bryan Pringle
Peter.....Job Stewart
Abraham.....Peter Bowles
An Apothecary..Edward Harvey
Page to Paris...John Greenwood
Street Musician...Timothy Parkes
Lady Montague...Jennifer Wilson
Lady Capulet..Margaret Courtenay
Juliet.....Claire Bloom
Nurse to Juliet.....Wynne Clark

This may not be the best "Romeo and Juliet" we'll ever see, but it will certainly do for this season.

DAILY NEWS

October 25, 1956

The Old Vic's 'Romeo and Juliet' A Performance of Great Beauty

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Old Vic Company's production of "Romeo and Juliet," which was presented at the Winter Garden last evening, is something to cheer about and to weep over. It is splendid theatre, and the splendor is not Shakespeare's alone.

Here is a work for the stage which comes close to perfection—beautiful to see and generally lovely to hear. My one critical reservation is that Claire Bloom's Juliet is an emotionally limited and vocally singsong performance. But this is oddly enough, a minor reservation in view of the generally superb quality of the offering.

Robert Helpmann, the director, should be given a major portion of a playgoer's thanks. He has staged this "Romeo and Juliet" with vigor and imagination, yet he has played no tricks. This is Shakespearean Shakespeare—or so it strikes this reporter, who lacks about three centuries of age to qualify as a real expert.

The Casting

This play moves, but it is never forced in its pace. Always it has a proper regard for and relish of the great beauty of the work. It is beautifully spoken by the Old Vic players, magnificently set and costumed by Loudon Sainthill, and cast with considerable imagination. In this company one finds a Mercutio and a Tybalt (Paul Rogers and Richard Wordsworth) who are extraordinary, and a jolly, hearty nurse played by Wynne Clark who is completely and enjoyably different from the sniveling old drudge one usually encounters in this part.

As Romeo, John Neville gives a beautiful, graceful and tasteful performance. Nothing about this "Romeo and Juliet" is deliberately showy, but almost all of it is uncommonly artful. It is fine work by a fine big company.

The New York Times
October 25, 1956

Theatre: Old Vic's 'Romeo and Juliet'

Stirring Drama Staged at Winter Garden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF "Romeo and Juliet" is not the most stunning romantic tragedy ever written, this is not the moment for quibbling. The Old Vic company has brought it to us in a stirring performance, which opened at the Winter Garden last evening.

Not being handicapped with stars, the Old Vic does not have to arrange the text in the form of effective scenes. Beginning with the somber invocation, spoken in ominous tones by Charles Gray, the Old Vic company plays this reckless tragedy straight through the roistering streets of Verona to the tomb of the Capulets, giving us the sweep of a hot-blooded story and the glory of the rhapsodic verse. Altogether it is a heady occasion.

Let this department file one objection and get it out of the way. The Old Vic is wedded to the nineteenth century notion of scenery that illustrates the story. Loudon Sainthill's sets for "Romeo and Juliet" are as good as most and have been ingeniously devised to simplify scene-changing. But a romantic tale that has the pace of a melodrama is cluttered and impeded by switching back and forth from one locale to another. Visually, the scenery also competes with the movement and sculpture of the acting. Although England is the native home of Shakespearean acting, the British could learn something from the North Americans about the formalization of décor and the release of acting from the art of painting pictures.

Within the convention that the Old Vic follows, Robert Helpmann has staged a performance that preserves the youthful exultation of the script. Shakespeare must have known that he was riding a romantic whirlwind when he wrote the play, and Mr. Helpmann's performance is fully conscious of the bravado, the daring, the raptures.

The street feuds are sullen and fiery. Tybalt, in the acting of Richard Wordsworth, is a macabre figure, and Mercutio, in the acting of Paul Rogers, is romantically heroic. One more flourish and he would be swashbuckling. But Mr. Rogers' taste is perfect, and Mercutio emerges as a highly intelligent, humorous and lively young fellow who enjoys life and is quite aware of the fact that his Queen Mab speech is exquisitely fanciful.

Instead of playing the nurse as an old crome, which seems to be the custom, Wynne Clark plays her as a woman whose flesh is still hot and yearning and whose bawdiness is not a memory of past delights but the natural speech of a wanton. A hearty Capulet by Ernest Hare, a direct and firm Prince of Verona by Mr. Gray, a humorous yet anxious Friar Laurence by Jack Gwillim, a lovely Lady Capulet by Margaret Courtenay — those performances provide a vibrant background for the turbulence of the story.

But everything hangs on the performances of the young lovers. They are young lovers in this production with a childlike Juliet by Claire Bloom and a Romeo who in John Neville's accomplished acting has not lost all his boyishness. Miss Bloom is a soft, dainty young lady glowing with youth. Her speaking voice is light. Occasionally she affects a hesitant manner of speech which breaks the rhythms of some of the most passionate verse ever written. Perhaps there is a little too much art in her acting and not enough of the recklessness which is the tone of the whole play.

As Romeo, Mr. Neville is ideal. He is handsome, lean and sensitive. He moves with unconscious grace. He speaks the verse easily without losing the impetuosity of the character. It is romantic acting that, by taste again, avoids the excesses of gesture, speech and posing.

As in the style of the whole performance, Mr. Neville has assimilated the ardor, imagery and extravagance of the drama in a pithy, pulsing character portrait. It's a great play when a fine company of actors plunges into the heart of it.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 25, 1956

THEATER

'Romeo and Juliet'

By WALTER KERR

AT THE Winter Garden Wednesday night I watched Claire Bloom—a kitten with a clear brow, deep dark eyes, and a wonderfully modest smile—dart in and out among the arches of her balcony, reprove the inconstant moon with a burst of childlike energy, and feverishly reach out to the raised, half-lighted arm beneath her, and I believed absolutely that she was in love. I believed more than that—that she was drugged by love. But I still won't swear that she was in love with Romeo.

It seems that it takes two to make a love affair, and the Old Vic's production of "Romeo and Juliet" may possibly be one short.

We do have Juliet, or at least a frequently captivating facsimile thereof. Miss Bloom has not only the radiant youthfulness for the part, she has the urgency and the stubborn heart and the ardent womanliness that most ingenues cannot quite imagine. In the detail of the role, in the odd little spurts of impulsive affection and sharp, breathless fear, she is superb.

Listen to her "good nights" that break very slightly in the middle of the phrase, to the sudden delight with which she envisions a still possible tomorrow, to the faint moan and half-shudder that escape her at the first mention of the fatal vault, and you will hear the precise accents of inexperience coming face to face with the unexpected joys and unthinkable terrors of life.

And to see her slowly rise from a desperate last embrace with Romeo and patiently, honestly insist that morning has indeed come is to watch a mature and responsible human being grow before your eyes. Whatever is visual, or fleetingly aural, in Miss Bloom's performance is enchanting. If a qualification remains to be made, it is that the individual images—intelligent and lovely as they are—do not fuse and boil over into the sustained reaches and open emotional torrents of the play's most glorious lines. Given a powerful procession of metaphors, Miss Bloom floats off into that extremely measured and intoned versifying that may be characteristic of the present company as a whole; we are most moved when the illuminations are very small ones.

What of Romeo? He is in the hands of John Neville, and Mr. Neville's hands are the elegant, high-fashion hands of a Beau Brummel who has just finished powdering his wig and is off for a quick swoon about town. Let us be fair to Mr. Neville: his diction is precise, his postures are in themselves graceful, and it is a further sorry fact that no one in our time has really succeeded in making this hot-blooded Latin whose tongue reels sonnets even remotely plausible.

But the postures are disturbingly empty of genuinely felt fire. When Mr. Neville beats the floor with his fists, you do not worry about the floor — or his fists. When he raises a dagger above his own heart, you feel much too certain that he is counting on being interrupted. (Compare this with Miss Bloom's dagger-work; on her the weapon looks dangerous).

There is, then little romantic energy generated between these lovers, forceful as Miss Bloom often is on her own. And there are certain further losses: Paul Rogers, whose performance in "Richard II" is so incisive, has an interesting attack on Mercutio above all on the "Queen Mab" challenge. His Veronese playboy has a chip on his shoulder, is even surly at times. The "Mab" speech comes close to resenting the tricks love plays, and the attitude finds a stimulating climax in the sarcasm with which Mercutio measures his ultimate wounds. But this special insight is extraordinarily low in key, somewhat dogged; where we count on exhilaration, we are given only one more sorrow. Wynne Clark's Nurse is freshly conceived, too: as a young, raven-haired, boisterous family friend. But so much youth and spirit removes much of the charm of a normally bawdy old crone; the air of the procuress intrudes.

On the credit side, director Robert Helpmann has built his first-act fencing match to a most satisfactory frenzy, there is good fun in a formal game of wits in the public square, and the business of drawing a rapier out of a staggering Tybalt is chilling.

Since there are two productions to come in the current Old Vic season, it is probably too early to be reaching for an estimate of this youngish company's capacities. There are any number of assets at hand: utter clarity of speech and story-line, a uniform and welcome dignity, a general production style that is decorative without ever overwhelming the players. The mark of exceptional competence is everywhere; what still has to come is the unmistakable flash of inspiration.

New York Post

October 25, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Old Vic's 'Romeo and Juliet'

The London Old Vic's "Romeo and Juliet," which was presented last night at the Winter Garden, is nowhere near as stirring as was its brilliant production of "Richard II" on the previous evening. It lacks the forcefulness, spirit, insight and general sense of excitement of that memorable event. Nor has it the direct eloquence of approach that made the earlier performance so strikingly distinguished. It is, in fact, a conventional and surprisingly routine version of the famous tragedy of the star-crossed lovers, with a number of virtues but small dramatic dash.

The fact is that, for all its lyric beauty and its touching subject matter, "Romeo and Juliet" is not altogether satisfying drama. Or, rather, it is an excellent play as long as Mercutio survives, but, after that gallant and unfortunate gentleman is slain by Tybalt and the blundering ministrations of the bumbling Friar Laurence take over the plot, it becomes so clumsily fabricated in its mischances of fortune that it declines steadily in interest. To atone for its growing dramatic weakness, the emphasis on the lyricism must be superbly managed.

Claire Bloom

Here, it seems to me, is where the Old Vic production falters. Claire Bloom is a lovely and sensitive Juliet, and she captures the quality of a spirited girl in love with gentle sweetness. There is no question about the appealing quality of her performance. But she is also inclined to be a monotonous actress, with difficulties in the matter of projecting her voice and in managing the lyric effectiveness of her role, and these are great handicaps to being a completely satisfying Shakespearean romantic heroine. She is touching without giving the play the proper lift.

Nor does the talented John Neville, who was superb as the doomed Richard, seem to me nearly so effective as Romeo. He, too, has the proper youth, simplicity and appealing sincerity, but his characterization is far less sure, incisive and deeply moving. As romantic lovers, he and Miss Bloom are unquestionably touching and believable, and there can be no question that they are talented players, but, to be satisfying, "Romeo and Juliet" must be acted with more power and insight than they brought to it last night.

Paul Rogers

If Paul Rogers was much more successful as Mercutio, it is equally true that the role is infinitely more striking. In the style of the Old Vic, Mr. Rogers doesn't emphasize the drama's famous and familiar passages. He takes the Queen Mab speech almost casually, and he makes the loyal friend of Romeo less of a roisterer and prankster than we usually find him in American productions. But his very moderation and reticence of approach are enormously effective, and, when one recalls the contrast with his playing of John of Gaunt in "Richard II," it is obvious that Mr. Rogers is a remarkable actor.

There are other good performances. Jack Gwillim gives Friar Laurence a kind of tolerant and tired humor that atones for a lot of the ineffectual cleric's fatuousness as a character, and Wynne Clark has the proper note of earthiness for the part of Juliet's nurse. Richard Wordsworth is a fine Tybalt. It remains clear that the Old Vic players are experienced Shakespeareans. But I don't think Robert Helpmann's staging has much imagination or resourcefulness, and, although Miss Bloom and Mr. Neville make attractive lovers, this is not an exceptional "Romeo and Juliet."

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

October 25, 1956

Juliet Is Alone With Her Balcony

By TOM DONNELLY.

There are two kinds of provincialism. One assumes that the domestic product must be vastly superior to the imported, and the other assumes that aesthetic perfection dwells abroad. It is perhaps unfair to go to see the Old Vic Company at the Winter Garden in a mood of expectant awe, as if the final Shakespearean revelation might be at hand.

The practical theatergoer would do well to lower his sights in the case of the company's "Romeo and Juliet," which opened last night. All of the secondary requirements are handsomely met. Loudon Sainthill's decor is ripely Italian, the actors move in graceful choreographic patterns, the duels are rendered with a fine athletic abandon, and the citizens of Verona are not, for a change, doddering antiques. Claire Bloom's Juliet is genuinely girlish, and director Robert Helpmann was not faced with the problem of giving the play's heroine a spurious youthful tone by surrounding her with an orchestration of creaking joints.

Easy Familiarity.

And, again, as was the case with "Richard II," the performers demonstrate an easy familiarity with the Shakespearean measure. Our own occasional Shakespearean actors often seem astonished at finding themselves in something that was not written by George S. Kaufman or John van Druten.

But then, with all their stress and strain, our own actors often produce a little electricity in rising to an unaccustomed challenge. The Old Vic's "Romeo and Juliet" is always pretty, invariably workmanlike, and for the most part as cold as a crumpet left over from yesterday's tea.

Miss Bloom affords such cause for rejoicing as there is. Her Juliet is lovely, fragile, and direct. Miss Bloom is a girl in love, right enough, and her ecstasy, anguish, and terror come forth with an appealing simplicity. She does not communicate these large emotions with anything approaching a profound force, and sometimes she is technically inadequate, projecting the sense of the poetry at the expense of the sound of it. In her more distraught moments, she is inclined to be unintelligible. (This failing is noticeable in other members of the company during the course of the evening, perhaps because the Winter Garden is too large and unfamiliar a terrain for the troupe, or perhaps it is just that I am not as attuned to the British idiom as I like to think I am.)

Considerable Success.

On balance, Miss Bloom's Juliet is a considerable success.

The other large roles are handled in a variety of ways, most of them dismaying. As Romeo, John Neville seems to be auditioning for Hamlet. Richard Wordsworth's Tybalt is an Iago inexplicably marooned without an Othello.

For a really novel interpretation, I give you the nurse of Wynne Clark. Miss Clark is a large dark lady with an abundant bosom, abundantly revealed. None of the traditional business of doing the nurse as an old crone for Miss Clark. Miss Clark is a lusty low-comedy vamp, all winks and wriggles and mighty guffaws. Are those castenets I hear clinking in the distance? Will Miss Clark, given any encouragement, break into the "Habanera?" I find I am a traditionalist. Give me the standard nurse, aches and pains and all.

Paul Rogers does nothing out of key as Mercutio, unless you count letting the "Queen Mab" speech sink without a trace.

To end on a happier note, I have absolutely no complaints to make about Margaret Courtenay's Lady Capulet, Jack Gwillim's Friar Laurence, Charles Gray's Escalus, or any of the lesser figures.

With heads held high, spirits staunch, and hope undimmed, let us move on to next Monday's "Macbeth."

Daily Mirror

October 25, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Romeo and Juliet' Interestingly Done

• Paul Rogers outstanding as Mercutio in Old Vic production.

The Old Vic Company's "Romeo and Juliet" proved a bit of a letdown, after its fine "Richard II" on opening night. This is not one of the easiest of Shakespeare's plays to bring off. Broadway is strewn with the wreckage of many notable productions. Star-studded ones, too.

"Romeo and Juliet" is one of the best known tales about starry-eyed young lovers. Perhaps the best known and beloved of them all. Yet, for almost half its length, it is dominated by a completely fascinating fellow named Mercutio. The Bard had to kill him off to keep him from running away with the rest of it.

BELIEVE IT OR not, we were once young ourself. We can recognize and sympathize with young lovers. But it's that cocky philosopher Mercutio who captures our imagination. Cyrano was a chip off the same block as this intelligent and combative gentleman of Verona.

The thing we miss most in the Old Vic's "Romeo and Juliet" is true inspiration. Robert Helpmann's direction is stained-glassy. His groupings are striking. They should be, since he was schooled in ballet. But his handling of the solo soarings is mannered to a point dangerously near old-fashioned.

For our money, the performance of the evening was Paul Rogers' Mercutio. It was amazing to see an actor, who had beautifully impersonated the aged John of Gaunt on the previous evening, dominate the same stage as the dashing, youthful, vital victim of a feud about which he didn't really gave a damn.

John Neville etched a sound, and often winning, Romeo. He was particularly moving in the second act, with his pal Mercutio out of the way. Claire Bloom, hailed as one of England's outstanding emotional actresses, proved something of a disappointment as Juliet. At her best, she brought fire and feeling to the role. At other times, she left a deal to be desired.

THE OLD VIC'S women—those we have seen so far—are just not up to its men when it comes to clarity of speech. Miss Bloom, for instance, was alternately eloquent and indistinct. There were moments when she seemed to be speaking a foreign tongue, not good, understandable English. But she was most certainly a treat for the eyes.

Wynne Clark's Nurse was perplexing for this traditionalist. Younger than most, she was aggressively salty and skittish. There was no mellow motherliness in her vision of the role.

We have seen few stirring "Romeo and Juliets" in our era. It's a lovely, touching play. Yet it seems to defy those who would give it to us in all its romantic, tragic glory. The Old Vic has done well by it, and it is rewarding to have it with us at all.

"Richard II"

New York Post

October 24, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Brilliant Start by the Old Vic

The illustrious Old Vic Company from London opened its New York season at the Winter Garden last night with a distinguished production of "Richard II." Beautifully spoken and forcefully acted, and with John Neville, a newcomer to American audiences, offering a stunning performance in the title role, Shakespeare's tragedy of the weakling monarch who achieved greatness in adversity was movingly, eloquently and powerfully presented, indicating once more, among other things, what sheer theatrical excitement the Bard's plays can arouse when done with skill and spirit.

"Richard II," of course, is chiefly known in this country for Maurice Evans' fine characterization of the hapless ruler. Without going into any comparisons of quality here, it can be said that I recall Mr. Evans as having concentrated more on the lyric beauty of individual scenes and speeches and perhaps less on the moving pathos of an unfortunate man who found his true status only in defeat and humiliation. Anyway, Mr. Neville offers a brilliantly and completely rounded portrayal that is nothing short of superb in its depth, poignancy and sense of tragic growth.

Nor is this production in any manner a one-man show. Every performance has a power and distinction of its own, and every speech has a strength and clarity that can be found only in the work of an actor with a thorough understanding of Shakespeare. To take two comparatively small parts, Paul Rogers presents a characterization of old John of Gaunt that makes the famous speech in praise of England seem as if it were something completely fresh, and Jack Gwillim gives the brief appearance of the banished Norfolk a force and dignity that are not easily forgotten.

Thus admirably and outspokenly acted, and staged by Michael Benthall with directness and vigor, the entire drama takes on a consistent theatrical interest that never loses the sense of lyric beauty. Most Shakespearean productions that we see in this country tend to emphasize either the eloquence or the dramatic narrative, and the concentration on one element usually means the sacrifice of the other. In this "Richard II," both qualities are fused in a brilliant whole, and the effect is a performance at once memorable and beautiful.

One remarkable virtue of "Richard II" as a play is the fashion in which it gives the lie to the allegedly British tradition of the stiff upperlip in times of adversity. The luckless Richard, a foolish and shallow man until tragedy comes to him, almost appears to relish his doom, so fervently and bitterly does he cry out his long wail of protest against fate and his enemies. And yet, as he complains and continues to contemplate and analyze his own misfortunes, he grows in stature before your eyes, and a trivial, petty figure is transformed into one of tragic size.

This is essentially a man's play, and the one woman's role, that of Richard's pathetic wife, is of small importance. It is played by Claire Bloom, and we will have to wait until we see Miss Bloom tonight in "Romeo and Juliet" before we can estimate her as a Shakespearean actress. But all of the masculine parts are excellently portrayed, and there should be a special word for Richard Wordsworth as the futile York, Charles Gray as the ruthless Bolingbroke, Ernest Hare as the violent Northumberland, and Denis Holmes as a loyal Bishop. The Old Vic "Richard II" is an event.

"RICHARD II"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Michael Benthall; decor by Leslie Hurry; music composed by Christopher Whelen; presented by the Old Vic Trust Ltd. and the Arts Council of Great Britain under the management of Sol Hurok at the Winter Garden Theatre, October 23, 1956. The cast:

King Richard II.....John Neville
John of Gaunt.....Paul Rogers
Henry Bolingbroke..Charles Gray
Thomas Mowbray..Jack Guillim
Lord Marshal.....Ronald Allen
Duke of Aumerle...Jeremy Brett
Page to Richard....Job Stewart
Herald to Bolingbroke.....
Daniel Moynihan
Herald to Mowbray..Peter Needham
Green.....Derek New
Bushy.....James Villiers
Bagot.....Alan Penn
Duke of York..Richard Wordsworth
Earl of Northumberland.....
Ernest Hare
Queen to King Richard.....
Claire Bloom
Lord Ross.....Bryan Pringle
Lord Willoughby..Edward Harvey
Henry Percy....John Greenwood
Lord Scroop of Berkeley....
John Woodvine
Earl of Salisbury.....
Timothy Parkes
Bishop of Carlisle..Denis Holmes

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 24, 1956

THEATER

'Richard II'

By WALTER KERR

"RICHARD II" is normally thought of as a play of murky political maneuvering handsomely rescued by the impassioned lyricism of its central figure. The distinguished Old Vic company, here from London for the first time in too many years, just about reverses the picture.

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It is the cold, shrewd, sometimes bitter realities of political life that take on the most vivid coloring in Michael Benthall's production at the Winter Garden. As old John of Gaunt prepares to die, a prophet who cannot make his capricious King see the handwriting on the wall, Paul Rogers vests this feeble but intelligent ancient with a fiery vision. Mr. Rogers slashes out a curt warning ("This rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last") and then plunges into the "this realm . . . this England" speech at an oddly measured rate and with a surprising curl to his lip. Instead of dwelling fondly on the land he is leaving, he gives himself over to an increasing irony—the ominous testament of an experienced man who knows that the greatest of kingdoms can falter—and the passage builds to a climax that is nearly savage in its wisdom, its weariness, and its sure, fatal knowledge of the ways of men.

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When Richard Wordsworth, as an uncle of Kings who has grown too old to show them force, catches his breath between opposed loyalties, damning a contender for the throne in one quick tirade and subtly inviting him into his castle a short, treacherous thought later, the whole balance of right and might is mockingly charted. When Charles Gray, as a rebellious Bolingbroke sentenced to exile, turns wryly away from his sovereign, arches his Mongol eyebrows, and snarls out the syllables that make a grisly joke of the absurd and thoughtless punishment meted out to him, the unpredictable fortunes of all who engage in the battle for power are crackingly outlined.

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And it is in the occasional flashes of brittle, despairing cynicism that John Neville's Richard comes most trenchantly alive. Bidding his most powerful enemy to get up off his knees Mr. Neville smirks faintly and gives the casual line, "Your heart is up, I know" a searing bite. Searching vainly in a mirror for the deeper lines that should be engraved on his unhappy face, or offering his usurping cousin the crown of England with a gesture that is all contempt, this monarch is regal—and venomous—indeed.

Mr. Neville is not, I think, anywhere near so successful with those soaring arias in which a stunned Richard puts foot on a land that has turned against him, a shaken Richard learns that he must deal with treason, or a broken Richard takes leave of his loyal wife. It isn't that the actor has no ear for the music Shakespeare offers him. He is bent, rather, on a character-course that is composed almost entirely of self-pity. Richard, as he is written, is one of those curious figures who gain stature in proportion as they lose power. But Mr. Neville's inner resources do not expand with the increasing melody of the lines; there is a whine that dogs this Richard at his most exalted and at his most resigned. He hasn't the fortitude to face his failure; and, as a consequence, we are never deeply touched by him.

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The cool statuette that Claire Bloom makes of her Queen is at least decorative; and Jack Gwillim and Ernest Hare bring considerable force to the lucky and unlucky conspirators they play. The production is stately, clear and physically handsome.

The New York Times
October 24, 1956

Theatre: Old Vic Gives 'Richard II'

British Troupe Begins Shakespeare Series

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF the Old Vic "Richard II" is an effortless, limpid performance, there is doubtless a sound reason. To be native English is to hold the key to Shakespeare. Behind the beautifully woven performance, which opened at the Winter Garden last evening, stands an English theatre with a Shakespeare tradition. Beyond that lies Shakespeare, gentleman of the realm.

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"Richard II" is an appropriate drama to begin a season of repertory here. For the young man who wrote it was rapturously in love with England—English soil, the English tongue, the island in the silver sea, the happy breed of the people, the sacred throne. "Richard II" is one of the less familiar plays, and not one of thunderous histories and tragedies that came later. But the tale it tells of the debasement of a King is pure English poetry, and one of the Old Vic's most notable productions.

In the staging, Michael Benthall seems to have managed everything with no trouble or strain. The performance moves with silken grace from the stormy first scene down through the embroils of Richard's inadequate reign to the pathos of his departure. Although the décor and the costumes by Leslie Hurry are theatrical and lovely, they are never ostentatious. Although the performance is theatrical in design, it is never overwrought. The mastery of the text is easy; the command of the verse is elegant.

Since there are no formal stars in the Old Vic's cast, the dramatic proportions of the performance are nicely balanced. And the characters are not parts but human beings intimately associated in a fabulous story. John Neville's Richard is a brilliant portrait that grows in stature as the King loses authority—a supercilious but winning dandy in early scenes, a crushed, though bitter and perceptive ruin at the end. There is nothing in Richard's unheroic character that Mr. Neville has not found some way to express in the unhurried flow of his performance.

The whole company is magnificent. Charles Gray's stern and laconical Bolingbroke; Paul Rogers' superb John of Gaunt who speaks the ode to the splendors of England with grace and simplicity; Jack Gwillim's reticent and unforgiving Mowbray; Ernest Hare's somber Northumberland; Richard Wordsworth's apprehensive York; Claire Bloom's child-like Queen—are quickly sketched characterizations that convey the homely truths of a cheerless tale.

The company has not yet caught the problem of being heard in the Winter Garden. When Mr. Benthall reduces the pitch of the performance in the mournfulness of the conclusion and when the actors drop their voices, they are difficult to hear in the front rows and are probably totally inaudible in the rear. Something will obviously have to be done to remedy this error.

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But the actors are worth hearing on two accounts: the verse, which is a little self-consciously sweet and clever, represents Shakespeare at an attractive point in his career. And the Old Vic actors know how to speak it well.

This is the finest Shakespearean troupe we have had in New York for years. In addition to "Richard II" it will play "Romeo and Juliet" (tonight), "Macbeth" (next Monday) and "Troilus and Cressida," late in December.

Daily Mirror

October 24, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Old Vic's 'Richard II' Sterling Production

• Bard's work is presented in all its splendor and majesty at the Winter Garden.

London's Old Vic Company restored our New York theatre to high estate Tuesday evening with a sterling production of "Richard II." Few, if any, of Shakespeare's plays boast more quotable lines, richer, nobler speech. And the welcome visitors from England are eminently capable of doing justice to the Bard's glorious words.

"Richard II" was the beginning of a series of historical plays, running through "Henry IV" and "Henry V." In them are traced the fall of Richard, the accession of Henry and the subsequent crowning of Prince Hal. Though the "Henrys" offer fascinating characters like Falstaff and Hotspur, they do not surpass "Richard" in poetic quality.

RICHARD WAS A playboy of his time. As ruler, he was petulant, arrogant and wasteful. In adversity, he became truly regal. This transformation has always impressed us as being a bit abrupt. But, in the hands of a master like Shapespeare, it is easy to accept.

Though Richard was toppled from his throne, and eventually murdered, he was given some of the Bard's most magnificent verse in compensation. What monarch ever spoke more moving lines than those on the death of kings? Misfortune brought him regeneration and infinite rewards.

In John Neville, the Old Vic has a Richard to equal any you may have seen. His voice is eloquent, and his conception of the role filled with striking nuances. He is less the brittle boy than most. Rather, is he heedlessly self-indulgent. He plants the seeds effectively for the king's maturity in defeat.

Charles Gray offers excellent contrast as Bolingbroke, whose humiliations drive him to seek vengeance on the malicious Richard. He makes words vibrate. He is lusty and forthright. A true man of action. Paul Rogers is the superior of the Gaunts we have encountered. His aged Duke has dignity, and he brings true wisdom to his deathbed speech of advice.

JACK GWILLIM, Richard Wordsworth and Denis Holmes are other standouts in the large cast. Claire Bloom, considered England's leading young emotional actress, has few opportunities to display her virtuosity in the relatively unimportant role of the Queen. However, we had difficulty in hearing many of her lines, though we were sitting well down front.

Leslie Hurry's sumptuous settings and costumes, which fill the Winter Garden's big stage, are a feast for the eyes. The backgrounds are devised to provide fluidity of movement, to obviate lulls. In them, director Michael Benthall groups his actors with the precision of a modern field marshal.

We bow in gratitude to S. Hurok for bringing greatness again to Broadway. "Richard II" is a great play, and the Old Vic Company has the genius to bring it alive. To give us all its poignance, splender and majesty. Playgoing once more is exciting. Something to look forward to.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 24, 1956

A Cardboard King Loses His Crown

By TOM DONNELLY.

In one of the last fits of royal pique he was to enjoy on this earth, King Richard II inspects himself in a looking glass, bitterly criticizes the glass for failing to reflect the elegant miseries he is sure must be engraved on his face, and hurls the offending instrument to the floor, where it cracks in a hundred shivers.

"The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed the shadow of your face," is the cool comment of Bolingbroke, the usurper.

If you were to say that William Shakespeare's "Richard II" is first and foremost a great poseur, in fact, a ham, you wouldn't be far wrong. John Neville, who is interpreting Richard in the Old Vic production at the Winter Garden, rolls his "r's" with voluptuous abandon, recoils with hissing petulance from the misfortunes that press in upon him, and greets all occasions, large and small, with luxurious outrage or cascading melancholy.

Mirror of Conceit.

One may credit Mr. Neville with every subtlety of intention in trying to give us a monarch who is constantly admiring himself in the mirror of his own conceit. But there is more to this Richard than a delight in exhibitionism, and certainly any actor tackling the part has to make as much as he can of the other possibilities. The character is not one of Shakespeare's more thrillingly complex creations, any more than the play is, and it demands an overlay of real grief, real pain, real despair.

In the opening scenes, when Richard is at the height of his greedy power, Mr. Neville manages handsomely, languidly inspecting his imposing jewelry, banishing subjects with headlong enthusiasm, and revealing himself as every inch the jaded monarch. Later on, all semblance of solid imperial humanity vanishes. The king becomes pure greasepaint and bombast, and the impression arises that the man's downfall was caused not by flaws in his character and by the stiff opposition of Bolingbroke, but by a gastric condition directly traceable to too much scenery chewing.

Novel and Agreeable.

Ah well, the scenery, devised by Leslie Hurry, is undoubtedly appetizing. In fact a great many things about this first Old Vic production of the season are admirable. It is novel and agreeable to witness a Shakespearean performance wherein all the actors speak in easy harmony, and all have a classical appearance.

As directed by Michael Benthall, the piece moves forward with taste and efficiency. Paul Rogers is a brilliant John of Gaunt and communicates the profound patriotic emotion of the "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" speech with an intensity calculated to win over such Anglophobes as may find themselves in the house. Charles Gray's Bolingbroke is a figure of imposing granite splendor, and Claire Bloom brings a lyric physical grace to the negligible queen.

Mr. Benthall has said that "Richard II" was chosen as the opening play of the American campaign because it represents "the Vic's traditional work." One may view it, then, as a sample of middle-ground achievement in an honorable continuous line, and look for something a bit more stimulating in the programs ahead.